

# EDITORIALS

## Keep forests healthy, keep tourists coming

Central Oregon's sunny summer is here, which means that tourists and their disposable income are, too. That's good; we like them. In fact, our greatest enduring hope in this area (other than that they'll someday pay a sales tax) is that our region will preserve the natural endowments that keep bringing them back every year. We just wish more of the state's leaders felt the same.

Oh, sure, Gov. Kulongoski talks about tourism a lot. And the Legislature is busy whipping up a new lodging tax to advertise far and wide what a great place Oregon is to visit. But what good are such efforts if the Oregon everybody comes to see goes to pot? Two recent events have made us wonder how far in that direction the state has already progressed and whether more than a handful of our state and federal leaders really care.

The first is the Davis Fire, which has consumed thousands of acres, chased off who knows how many visitors and dealt a significant blow to nearby La Pine's tourist-dependent businesses. As everyone in the West surely knows by now, millions and millions of acres of federal forestland are at elevated risk for disease, insect infestation and catastrophic wildfire. All too frequently, however, projects that could improve the health of forests (and preserve the resource all of those tourists come to enjoy) are stalled by environmentalists using administrative appeals and lawsuits.

In response, Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., has co-sponsored legislation that would streamline the planning process for certain forest health projects and shorten appeal and lawsuit deadlines — all without eliminating public input. The bill cleared the House in May with 42 votes from Democrats. Not a single one of these came from a Democrat representing Oregon. Peter DeFazio, Earl Blumenauer, Darlene Hooley, David Wu all voted no. It's a sad, sad day, when Democrats from Tennessee (John Tanner), Alabama (Robert Cramer) and Pennsylvania (John Murtha) can see the value of legislation that will prevent terrible fires in the West, but not four representatives from Oregon, which loses huge chunks of forest to wildfire every year.

The second disturbing event hasn't gotten as much attention as the Davis Fire, but it's just as significant in its own way. On June 30, just days before the July 4 holiday, Diamond Lake was placed off-limits to water skiing, swimming and wading. The reason is a bloom of blue-green algae that makes people sick. The algae has become a problem in recent years thanks to an explosion in the population of tui chub, a bait fish probably introduced by anglers. The chub have wreaked havoc on the lake's ecology, spoiling the water for people and, before that, wrecking it for the economically valuable trout population. Between 1963 and 1978, according to an Umpqua National Forest planning document, about 270,000 trout averaging 12 inches in length were pulled from the lake. By 1999, that harvest plummeted to 5,000 trout averaging 10 inches.

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mond Lake Resort. Rick Rockholt, the resort's marketing coordinator, calls this week's water restrictions "devastating." The algae bloom couldn't have come at a worse time, he says, with one of the resort's busiest weekends just around the corner. On the day after the closure was announced, the resort received 27 e-mail cancellations for the next month. On a normal day, Rockholt says, the resort gets no more than one or two.

What makes the situation at Diamond Lake so frustrating is the fact that a proven solution is available. Back in 1954, following a similar chub infestation, all of the fish in the lake were killed with rotenone, a naturally occurring substance. The lake was then restocked with much success. (This drastic treatment didn't destroy any naturally occurring fish populations in Diamond Lake because the lake was originally fishless.)

The Umpqua National Forest has, in fact, proposed just such a course of action. However, the planning process is complicated and time-consuming, and even if no bureaucratic or legal complications arise, Diamond Lake Resort will get no relief for quite some time. At the earliest, says Rockholt, the lake won't be treated until the fall of 2005. And this solution, remember, would address a problem that has been recognized for a decade. Algae blooms, says Rockholt, have shut down the lake for three years now.

The culprit here isn't the forest service, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife or any of the other agencies that have to think and study the problem to death before sending the tui chub to the great sardine can in the sky. It's the process itself, which leads to what some people like to call analysis paralysis.

Oregon can spend millions and millions of dollars trolling for tourists if it wants to, but it'll be wasted if, in the end, the July 4 fireworks come from the trees around their campsites and a dip in that pristine, blue-green mountain lake gives them a rash. They might as well battle the tar balls and syringes at the Jersey Shore.

The solution to these problems isn't going to be easy, and without some high-profile leadership we wonder whether it will happen at all. That sounds like a job for the tourism governor. He should start by asking the state's Democratic congressmen why they couldn't be bothered to vote for Walden's legislation. He should also start using his bully pulpit to question the process that prevents the treatment of valuable resources like Diamond Lake.

And while he's at it, he ought to monitor how long it takes some of the trees now burning near Davis Lake to find their way to area mills, where non-tourists can turn them into paychecks. With any luck, it'll happen before his term expires.